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# Diplomats and the Civil War at Sea

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**Abstract:** The Civil War created problems for Anglo-American relations as Confederate interests attempted to build commerce raiders in British shipyards and to provide blockade-runners to service the Southern economy. US consuls in such key places as Liverpool and Bermuda were instrumental in attempting to stop this traffic by diplomatic means. Confederate commerce raiders, most notably the *Alabama* and the *Shenandoah*, were able to put to sea and caused great damage to the Northern merchant fleet, for which the British government was eventually held responsible. The Union Navy, led by figures like Admiral David Glasgow Farragut, found that the capture of Southern ports, such as New Orleans, Mobile, and Wilmington, were the most effective way of stopping blockade-runners. The naval war was a major theatre of operations during the Civil War and secondarily also endangered US relations with Britain.

**Keywords:** Civil War diplomacy, Civil War at sea, commerce raiders, blockade-runners, US consuls, David Glasgow Farragut, Thomas Haines Dudley, Charles Maxwell Allen

**Résumé :** La guerre de Sécession a créé des problèmes en ce qui a trait aux relations anglo-américaines alors que les intérêts des Confédérés tentaient de construire des bateaux corsaires marchands dans les chantiers navals anglais et de fournir des forceurs de blocus au service de l'économie du Sud. Les consuls américains d'endroits clés comme Liverpool et les Bermudes ont joué un rôle capital en tentant de mettre un frein à ce trafic par des moyens diplomatiques. Les corsaires marchands confédérés, tout particulièrement l'*Alabama* et le *Shenandoah*, ont pu s'aventurer en mer et infliger d'énormes dommages à la flotte marchande du Nord, dommages pour lesquels le gouvernement britannique a par la suite été tenu responsable. L'Union Navy, ayant à sa tête des hommes comme l'amiral David Glasgow Farragut, ont trouvé que la capture de ports du Sud, comme la Nouvelle-Orléans, Mobile, et Wilmington, était la manière la plus efficace de bloquer les forceurs de blocus. La guerre navale a été un théâtre d'opérations majeur pendant la guerre de Sécession et a aussi mis en danger les relations des États-Unis avec la Grande-Bretagne.

**Mots clés :** diplomatie de la guerre de Sécession, guerre de Sécession en mer, corsaires marchands, forceurs de blocus, consuls américains, David Glasgow Farragut, Thomas Haines Dudley, Charles Maxwell Allen

The American Civil War took place on many fronts. In the popular mind, and in a great deal of the historical literature, the dominant image is that of the land war and particularly the great struggles that took place for control of Virginia and the defence of Maryland and Pennsylvania—the struggles to defeat the army of General Robert E. Lee in his defence of Richmond and to prevent his forces from invading the North. In fact, the war took place over much more vast stretches of the United States, and indeed it had international and maritime dimensions that took the conflict well beyond the boundaries of North America, even if it never became a world war in the twentieth-century sense of the term. Certainly in the last forty years historians have discovered anew the diplomatic and the naval history of the rebellion and they have shown that in many instances diplomatic and naval affairs merge together. In retrospect, the outcome of the war and perhaps even the history of the twentieth century would have been quite different if international relations and the naval war pursued by the Union had been less successful.

The most obvious diplomatic question was whether the European powers, and specifically Great Britain, would intervene in the war on behalf of the Confederacy. All evidence points to the assumption that Jefferson Davis, his government, and many Southerners were convinced that the European powers, and specifically Great Britain, would have to intervene in order to maintain the supply of cotton necessary to keep their profitable textile industries flourishing. This was called “King Cotton Diplomacy” and was skilfully described in Frank Lawrence Owsley’s book, *King Cotton Diplomacy* (1931).

It was the over-riding task of the United States minister to Great Britain, Charles Francis Adams, to prevent Britain from setting in motion events likely to lead to intervention on behalf of the Confederacy, such as presenting an ultimatum to mediate the conflict or extending diplomatic recognition to the South. The two sons of Minister Adams and the historian Ephraim D. Adams, in his *Great Britain and the American Civil War* (1924), made the first steps to explain Northern efforts to prevent this calamity. In 1960, Martin B. Duberman wrote the first scholarly biography of Charles Francis Adams, although he devoted only three chapters out of twenty-

seven to these diplomatic problems. However, in 1974 and 1980, Brian Jenkins produced a substantial two-volume study called *Britain & the War for the Union*, in which he explored all aspects of British-American relations during the conflict, and in 1992 Howard Jones addressed this key issue directly in *The Union in Peril*. Jenkins and Jones were particularly good at explaining the hesitation of the British government to make a decision in September and October 1862 to offer to mediate between the warring sides in America, with the presumption of recognition of the South and probable conflict with the North. However, many questions remain, and more specific studies of the American policies of the prime minister, Lord Palmerston, the foreign secretary, Lord John Russell, and the chancellor of the exchequer, William E. Gladstone, would be enormously helpful in understanding British intentions.<sup>1</sup>

The issue with the greatest potential for leading to conflict between Britain and America was the construction of Confederate naval vessels in British shipyards. During 1862 the armed commerce raiders CSS *Florida* and CSS *Alabama* were built in Liverpool shipyards, put to sea, armed with British guns, and manned largely by British sailors. The *Alabama*, the *Shenandoah*, and several other ships, in fact, never actually entered a Confederate port. Here were the makings of a made-in-Britain Confederate navy. Many of these issues were fully explored in Frank J. Merli's *Great Britain and the Confederate Navy, 1861–1865* (1970), and Warren F. Spencer's *The Confederate Navy in Europe* (1983). Minister Adams kept steady pressure on Lord John Russell to prevent new iron-clad vessels ordered by the Confederates from Laird and Sons, the Birkenhead shipbuilder, from putting to sea, the so-called Laird Rams. The point man collecting evidence and reporting on the progress of their construction was the United States consul in Liverpool, Thomas Haines Dudley. Dudley has been something of a shadowy figure, described briefly in several of the books mentioned earlier.<sup>2</sup> Two careful studies of Dudley have emerged recently: David Hepburn Milton's *Lincoln's Spymaster* (2003) and Coy F. Cross's *Lincoln's Man in Liverpool* (2007). A Quaker lawyer from Camden, New Jersey, Dudley had been active in anti-slavery affairs and the organization of the Republican Party. His efforts to swing votes to Abraham Lincoln in the nominating convention in 1860 earned him a claim to a federal appointment, and he was offered either minister to Japan or consul at Liverpool. For reasons of health he chose Liverpool, arriving there in November 1861, on the eve of the "Trent crisis," that turning point in British attitudes toward the United States.

Liverpool, in fact, was a centre of pro-Confederate sentiment, the major British port city for the import of Southern cotton, the distribution point to the textile factories in the Midlands, and the major shipyards for the construction of both British blockade-runners and Confederate commerce raiders. Dudley found few friends in Liverpool. However, he quickly learned that ships being built in the nearby shipyards had an ominously war-like character. Although officially they were owned by private individuals, it was a poorly kept secret that the ships were destined for the Confederacy. Both international law and British domestic law ruled against a neutral providing open support for a belligerent. In Britain the 1819 Foreign Enlistment Act seemed intended to prevent the exact situation the American diplomats saw unfolding before them. British subjects were forbidden to "be concerned in the equipping, furnishing, fitting out, or arming, of any ship or vessel, with intent or in order that such ship or vessel be employed in the service" of a belligerent.<sup>3</sup> However, the law did not actually say "building." Eventually the court took a narrow interpretation of the passage and ruled that even if a ship looked like a naval vessel, if it did not actually have guns on it the law was not violated. Thus both the *Florida* and the *Alabama* sailed without weapons, loaded guns in a port outside British jurisdiction, signed on British sailors also outside British jurisdiction, and became the nucleus of the Confederate Navy. If this did not violate the letter of the law, did it violate the spirit? Furthermore, did this issue at some point supersede the law and become a political question? If the building of even more powerful warships were allowed to be completed, was the British government complicit? The answers to these questions had profound implications for a workable understanding of the rights of neutrals and belligerents.

It fell to Consul Dudley to uncover the evidence and build the legal argument to force the British government to accept responsibility for these British-built ships becoming Confederate warships. The books by Milton and Cross cover much of the same ground and agree about the crucial role that Dudley played, although there are differences. *Lincoln's Spymaster*, not surprisingly, explores Dudley's efforts to visit and examine shipyards in Liverpool and Glasgow to follow the building of Confederate ships himself. In addition to working with Adams in London, Dudley was assisted by Henry Sheldon Sanford, US minister in Belgium, Freeman Harlow Morse, US consul in London, and Henry Wilding, his vice consul, and he hired the able detective Matthew Maguire to pursue a more

clandestine examination of the various ships. Dudley also bought information from shipyard workers, sailors, and people on the street. He reported to the State Department that his informants were “not as a general thing very estimable men, but they are the only persons we can get to engage in this business, which I am sure you will agree with me is not a very pleasant one” (32–33). *Lincoln’s Man in Liverpool* focuses on Dudley’s building of legal cases to prevent the sailing of these ships, and after the fact to show British negligence in enforcing their own neutrality law in allowing the ships to sail. Dudley’s greatest success was recruiting Clarence Randolph Yonge, the paymaster on the *Alabama*, as both a source of information and later a witness in the trial over the CSS *Alexandra*. Dudley attempted to resign after the end of the Civil War, but he was asked to stay on as consul in Liverpool. A major task was to take possession of Confederate property on behalf of the federal government and later to help build the American case for what became the “*Alabama* claims”—the damage claims against Britain for the destruction of American merchant shipping by the commerce raiders that were eventually settled by the Geneva Arbitration Tribunal in 1872. Dudley worked with the lawyers who presented the American case at the Tribunal, which awarded the United States \$15,500,000 in damages, the largest arbitration award ever granted up to that date. Only then did Dudley resign and return to New Jersey and the life of a successful lawyer and businessman.

The most formidable of the commerce raiders was the CSS *Alabama*, which captured or destroyed sixty-six ships, including the USS *Hatteras*, the only US naval vessel lost in a battle at sea during the Civil War. Much has been written about the *Alabama*, starting with the memoirs of her captain, Raphael Semmes, the first lieutenant, John McIntosh Kell, and lieutenant, Arthur Sinclair. So strong an impression did the ship and its captain make that monographs about the cruise of the *Alabama* have almost always been in print. The most recent of a long line of books is Stephen Fox’s *Wolf of the Deep* (2007). Fox’s focus is really on Semmes and the operations of the cruiser, rather than the construction of the ship and the efforts by Dudley and Adams to prevent its sailing. Through a very discriminating reading of Semmes’s memoirs and numerous other accounts, Fox is able to give an insightful picture of the celebrated captain, as well as vivid descriptions of the capture of many of the ships, the imprisonment of their crews, and the destruction of the vessels. An undercurrent throughout the cruise of the *Alabama*

was the tension between the officers, all Southerners, and the crew, of mixed nationalities but mostly British. Semmes was confronted with desertion, several mutinies, and constant insubordination. His sailors were working for money, not fighting for the Confederacy. The *Alabama* came to a spectacular end in a brief battle with the USS *Kearsarge* off Cherbourg on 19 June 1864. The several chapters devoted to the public reaction in both the North and the South, as well as in Britain, to the operations of the *Alabama*, is one of the strengths of the book. Whether Captain Semmes was a gallant officer or a ruthless pirate is a tension in the narrative that is never fully resolved, although the title of the book, taken from an 1864 poem written by the Philadelphia poet George J. Boker, would incline toward that of a pirate.<sup>4</sup>

The term *pirate* was even more closely tied to the CSS *Shenandoah*. Between 2005 and 2007 three books have been published recounting the exploits of this commerce raider that carried out its destruction of the American whaling fleet in the Pacific Ocean until late June 1865, even after being informed that the war was over. John Baldwin and Ron Powers in *Last Flag Down* (2007), Tom Chaffin in *Sea of Gray* (2006), and Lynn Schooler in *The Last Shot* (2005), tell very much the same story about the *Shenandoah*, drawing largely on the same published memoirs of the ship's officers. While Baldwin and Powers and Schooler tend to focus more on the opinions and activities of the crew, and identify quotations by lines in italics, Coffin provides a closer examination of the seizures and destruction of the Yankee ships and provides full documentation from a wider range of sources. Unlike the *Florida* or the *Alabama*, the *Shenandoah* was converted from a fast merchant sailing ship with auxiliary steam power to that of a commerce raider. Built by Alexander Stephen and Sons in Glasgow in 1863 as the *Sea King*, the ship had service out to New Zealand as a merchant vessel. Back in port on the Clyde the following spring, *Sea King* was identified by Thomas H. Dudley as a likely prospect for the Confederates, and indeed James Bulloch arranged for her surreptitious purchase and careful removal to Madeira where a rendezvous was made with a supply ship carrying guns and equipment. On 17 October 1864 she became the CSS *Shenandoah* and began an incredible odyssey that led to the capture or sinking of thirty-eight ships, the decimation of the northern Pacific whaling fleet, her circumnavigation of the world, and ended with her being the last Confederate force to lay down its arms. The *Shenandoah*, like the *Alabama*, had difficulties with her crew. Only a small number of

the British sailors who brought the ship to Madeira were willing to sign on and others were subsequently recruited from among the sailors captured, and those only after it became clear that they would get better treatment as seamen than as prisoners. Relations among the officers deteriorated also, exacerbated at the end of the cruise by anxiety that having kept up their destruction of the American whalers for two months after the end of the war they might well be charged with piracy. They were in a delicate situation when the ship returned to Liverpool on 6 November 1865 and surrendered to HMS *Donegal*. In the end, the British government set the officers and crew at liberty and, in an act of some irony, turned the *Shenandoah* over to the US consul, Thomas H. Dudley. While the cruise of the *Shenandoah* around the world was a remarkable feat, particularly sailing from the Aleutian Islands around Cape Horn to Liverpool—23,000 miles in 122 days—without sighting land, it was, like the efforts of the *Alabama*, without significant effect on the war. The commerce raiders cost American private citizens a great deal of money, crippled the merchant fleet, and were an embarrassment to the Lincoln administration, but they did not threaten the federal government, much less win the war for the South. Unquestionably, the greatest threat of the commerce raiders was to Anglo-American relations.

More important than the commerce raiders, in the judgment of the Navy Department, was the blockade of the Southern ports, and once again British relations with the Union government were jeopardized. A high proportion of the blockade-runners were either British ships or British-built ships, and they were carrying British supplies to the South and returning with cotton. The British crown colony of Bermuda, 674 miles east of Wilmington, North Carolina, and 850 miles from Charleston, South Carolina, became a leading mid-Atlantic port for the reshipment of goods intended for blockade-runners attempting to bring supplies through the Union naval blockade into the Confederacy. Glen N. Wiche's book, *Dispatches from Bermuda* (2008), provides an insight into the Union struggle to enforce the blockade. Charles Maxwell Allan, a merchant and early supporter of the Republican Party, arrived in Bermuda in November 1861 and found himself in a community with ties mostly to the South. Furthermore, the shipment of goods to the island and their transfer to blockade-runners quickly created a booming economy. Warehouses, docks, and repair facilities were completely dominated by this new trade, and the island was flooded with Southerners. Like Dudley in Liverpool, Allen found few friends or



supporters of the Northern cause. Allen's correspondence shows his efforts to inform the State Department and the Navy of the ships that put into Bermuda, their cargoes, and their sailing schedules. His one friend on the island was an artist, and they both drew sketches and watercolour paintings of the ships about to sail to the Confederacy so that they could be accurately identified. He also tried, without much success, to persuade the Navy to station ships off the island to break up the blockade-running. The local population was stunned as the Confederacy began to crumble in 1865. Allen reported to the department that "upon receipt of the information by the *Owl* [that the port of Wilmington had been captured by Union forces], business was nearly suspended and had they known the Islands were to sink in twenty-four hours, there could hardly have been more consternation" (170). Allen remained United States consul after the war until his death in 1888, during which time he became a respected figure, and is buried in Bermuda. His correspondence is largely from Record Group 84, Consular Despatches from Bermuda, in the National Archives, and private papers in the Vermont Historical Society and the Bermuda Archives.

The question of the effectiveness of the blockade has remained one of the fascinating and controversial issues of the Civil War. Stephen R. Wise's *Lifeline of the Confederacy* (1988), in many ways the definitive work on the subject, concludes that the blockade-runners were able to keep the Confederate forces surprisingly well equipped, uniformed, and fed right up until late 1864 and early 1865.<sup>5</sup> Not until the capture of Wilmington and Charleston in February 1865 did the Army of Northern Virginia begin to suffer severe shortages of vital necessities, he argues. In direct contrast are the assertions of historians such as John Nevin, who, in his study of Lincoln's secretary of the navy, Gideon Welles, states that "the blockade was one of the outstanding triumphs of Union strategy."<sup>6</sup> Robert M. Browning, Jr., has extended this discussion with his second book on the subject, *Success Is All That Was Expected* (2002). As in his earlier volume, Browning shows that the Navy was completely unprepared and ill equipped in 1861 to mount a full blockade of the Confederate states. Ships were purchased by the Navy Department and re-rigged as best as possible to carry out blockade duties, but the draft of these vessels was almost invariably too deep to operate effectively in shoal waters and they were too slow to chase blockade-runners. The blockade-runners themselves were fast purpose-built ships, with shallow drafts and low profiles, that initially outclassed the cumbersome deep-water naval vessels.

Browning shows that, short of ships and crews to mount a traditional blockade of the coast, the Navy turned to capturing the port towns themselves, or at least the fortifications dominating access to the port towns. Much of Browning's book, therefore, is focused on the attempts of the Navy, together with elements of the Army, to capture the ports along the coast from South Carolina to Florida, and particularly Charleston. In many ways, the book is really the story of the frustrations of the commanders of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, first Admiral Samuel Francis DuPont, and then Admiral John Adolphus Bernard Dahlgren. Three major operations failed to capture the port, and not until Confederate troops evacuated the city in February 1865, as a result of General William T. Sherman's land operations, was the mission accomplished. By that time also both ships and techniques had improved to such a degree that only one out of two blockade-runners was successful. Increasingly in 1865 the Army of Northern Virginia began to suffer shortages of vital supplies. Clearly as the war went on, the Union Navy became more effective in isolating the Confederacy, so the statistics for the Navy steadily improved. Perhaps the gulf between Wise's figures and those of Niven depends on which year of the war is considered.

One of the major figures to emerge from the Civil War was David Glasgow Farragut, the hero of the battles of New Orleans and Mobile Bay and the first admiral in the United States Navy. The paintings of Farragut at the Battle of Mobile Bay, lashed to the rigging above the gun smoke of his flagship, USS *Hartford*, giving the command, "Damn the torpedoes; full speed ahead!" stirred generations of Americans and still does. Farragut was certainly a crucially important commander in the war and his victories were essential to the triumph of the Union government. As such, he has been the subject of numerous biographies, of which those of his son, Loyall Farragut in 1879, Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1892, and Charles Lee Lewis in 1941 and 1943, are the most well known. Interest in the admiral has never really diminished, and in recent years two fresh volumes have appeared: Robert J. Schneller's *Farragut* (2002) and James P. Duffy's *Lincoln's Admiral* (2006). Schneller's *Farragut* is a slim volume of 116 pages, one of the Military Profiles series published in 2002 for what was then Brassey's. While the focus of this book is almost entirely on his military career, a strong sense of Farragut's personality emerges, from his childhood in the Navy, to his humiliation as a prisoner in the War of 1812, to the emotions of leaving all his connections in

Virginia to go north to New York with the outbreak of the Civil War. Eventually charged with command of the West Gulf Blockading Squadron, his first major responsibility was the capture of New Orleans. Farragut's great innovation was to realize that steam-powered ships could challenge land fortifications in a way that slower, less manoeuvrable sailing ships could not. By this tactic he successfully led his squadron past the two forts guarding the passage to New Orleans and captured the city. He was to repeat variations of this direct attack, passing land fortifications further up the Mississippi River and also two years later at Mobile Bay. All of this was not without its problems and Farragut almost of necessity was forced to slight the blockade-keeping duties of his squadron, as seemed to be the case for the Atlantic Squadrons as well. However, his capture of New Orleans was of enormous importance in depriving the South of its most important sea port and advancing the Union assault by dividing the Confederacy along the Mississippi River. Duffy covers all of the same ground in *Lincoln's Admiral* but provides more details about Farragut's personal life. Both authors view Farragut as a brilliant commander who generated enormous loyalty from among his crews. They do not diminish the difficulties that he faced or the mistakes that he made, but see him as one of the great men to emerge from the Civil War. Although Schneller's book is shorter, he has based it on a closer reading of original documents, while Duffy has relied entirely on secondary materials.

The determination of the Confederacy to both build a navy in British shipyards and to fight the war with equipment and supplies smuggled through the Union blockade meant that British relations with the Northern government were strained to the breaking point several times throughout the war. The building of the commerce raiders and the blockade-runner traffic arose largely out of the uncertainty in the minds of Britain's leaders—Palmerston, Russell, and Gladstone—as to whether it was in the best interests of Britain to see the Confederate States succeed or fail. The efforts of the US minister and consuls in Liverpool, Bermuda, and elsewhere were directed toward both preventing the construction of ships for the Confederacy and pointing out to the British government the dangers of ignoring their obligations in the crisis. As historians now attempt to measure the importance of commerce raiders like the *Alabama* and the *Shenandoah* and to assess the success or failure of the blockade and the blockade-runners, the larger significance

may revert to the degree to which those war measures threatened Anglo-American relations, both then and in subsequent generations. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, Britons and Americans both disliked and feared each other. However, events like the Geneva Arbitration Tribunal, settling the “Alabama claims,” and later British support for the United States in the Spanish American War in 1898, did much to ease that overt hostility. Inasmuch as the success of the great international and military crises of the twentieth century depended to a great extent on British and American solidarity, the long-term implications of these Civil War threats to Anglo-American relations were profound.

### Notes

1. Bell is still the best account of Palmerston and the United States, although Krein is also helpful. Walpole is probably still the most informative biography of the foreign minister. Morley gives some material on Gladstone’s actions in the Civil War period. Berwanger provides a relatively recent commentary on the British diplomatic and consular activity in America during the war.
2. Dudley was also the subject of a book by Potts and an article by Dyer. Dudley also figures in an article by Foster.
3. Ephraim D. Adams, *Great Britain*, 2:116.
4. Four lines of the poem by George H. Boker read:  
     Semmes has been a wolf of the deep  
     For many a day to harmless sheep;  
     Ships he scuttled and robbed and burned,  
     Watches pilfered and pockets turned.  
         Fox, *Wolf of the Deep*, p. 207.
5. Wise argues that some 300 steamships made 1,300 attempts to pass through the blockade and over one thousand were successful (221). He concludes that the United States Navy captured only 136 vessels and that another 85 were destroyed. Still Jr. agrees, arguing that no Confederate port was completely closed until it was physically captured (131–40).
6. Niven asserts that the Navy captured or destroyed 1,151 blockade runners of all types, as well as 355 other ships, during the course of the war. When the war started in 1861 the Navy had only 41 ships in commission, of which only 12 were in northern waters and ready for service; by the end of war the Navy had built 208 new ships, including ironclads and monitors, and had almost 700 ships in commission—a fleet second only to the Royal Navy (348). Bern Anderson concludes that the blockade was “one of the major factors that brought about the

ultimate collapse and defeat of the South" (232). Ivan Musicant states that the blockade "slowly strangled the Confederacy" (432). Spencer C. Tucker notes that the blockade "starved" the South of vital weapons and heavy machinery (364). William M. Fowler, Jr., does not make a strong assertion about the economic effectiveness of the blockade, but argues that it was important in isolating the Confederacy in terms of international relations (304–05). By contrast, David G. Surdam makes the point that the blockade had a very direct economic impact, driving down the price of cotton in the South and driving it up in Europe. He argues also that the blockade forced the South to abandon coastal and much river transportation and to rely on an inadequate railroad system to move supplies and troops (*passim*).

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